

our attention with their intense colouring, of a richness which is reserved for him. Still very young, M. Signac possesses an admirable tone: the sense of Parisianism, but a Parisianism which escapes caricature and ugliness. Some of his landscapes, if M. Raffaëlli had dealt with them, would have proffered desolate tones, thinning vegetation, a sooty black spreading everywhere. *The Bank of Asnières* is depicted completely differently, with a pale gold sky, which, reflected in the water, sows infinite sparks into it, of a skilful and ample variation. The red rooftops are new and gay, the smoke undulates gracefully and the sky almost shows through it. The water, above all, is impressive. The pilotis are reflected in them with real tremblings; they stretch, they flow, they come to moisten the bottom of the frame with their multiple reflections where extraordinary scales of colours play and complete themselves, at times dulled, at other times rendered metallic by the liquid. *Milliners*. – 'One figure has an angular, very strange face, concentrating on the work with which her slim fingers busy themselves, the other, crouched, is picking up a pair of scissors.' The outline is confident and the limbs are in the right place, in spite of the not very balanced pose of the latter. The colourist has allowed himself the joy of executing a symphony in blue; it is everywhere, on the wall hangings, in the dresses, in the reflections in the black hair, in the shadows of the papers. The excesses of a temperament.

The seascapes of M. Seurat were not put into question even by the journalists. Their immense calm imposes itself at very first sight, with their eroded, chipped cliffs in rows, their waves being reborn in the distance, and the enormous quantity of air moving between the sky and this water. M. Seurat succeeds in giving, as skilfully as M. Pissarro, the feeling of visual void in the stretches of air. The fate of the large painting *Sunday at the Grande Jatte* was completely different. No one understood the beauty of this hieratic drawing, the correctness of the yellow tints used where the crowd of people gradually grows smaller towards the background. The trees are thrust straight in; neither copse nor branch mark the successive distances or the points of reference, in the way required, wrongly, by convention. There is nothing fake in this depth obtained without even a gradation of the tones; the values of the colours are maintained throughout, to the last of the leaves. Everything appears clear, precise, without any mists where the difficult points could have been hidden. An extraordinary scale of tones. Silk roses on the dress of a baby, next to the woollen roses on the dress of the mother; a world of differences masterfully noted. And even the stiffness of the people, the sharp forms contribute to creating the sound, the ring of the modern, a reminder of our tight suits, moulded to our bodies, the reserve of our gestures, the British cant imitated by all of us. We take on the same attitudes as those of characters in Memling. M. Seurat has seen this perfectly, has understood, conceived and translated it with the pure drawing of the Primitives.

To summarize, this exhibition initiates us into a new art, eminently remarkable for the scientific basis of its methods, the return to primitive forms and the philosophical concern to arrive at pure apperception. It introduces us to two defining temperaments; the masters of the landscape, Guillaumin and Pissarro, a very gifted colourist M. Signac, and an artistic revolutionary, M. Seurat, who without doubt will soon manage to win the attention and the curiosity of the public.

## 7 Félix Fénéon (1861–1944) 'The Impressionists in 1886'

Fénéon was principally active as a writer during the period 1883–92, while he was employed in the War Ministry – which employment he was forced to resign after being tried for anarchism in 1894. In 1884 he co-founded the *Revue indépendante* and he was also involved with the *Revue Wagnérienne*, with *Le Symboliste*, and with *L'Art moderne*, published in Brussels. He was drawn to Seurat's work after seeing his *Bathers at Asnières* in the Salon des Indépendants in 1884, and subsequently became both a supporter of the Neo-Impressionist movement and a retailer of its theories. In the text that follows, his account of Degas's nudes offers an interesting contrast to Huysmans's review (VIa5). Though Fénéon shares the latter's assumptions concerning the cruelty of the artist's regard, his descriptions of the pictures are far more attentive to their actual formalities, and he makes the all-important practical point that Degas's Realism could not be the product of direct observation, but must be the result of an accumulation of studies. It is in his writing on the Neo-Impressionists that Fénéon comes into his own, however, displaying his acquaintance both with the colour theories underlying the practice of the painters and with the evolution of their work. The essay was first published as a review, 'Les Impressionistes en 1886', in *La Vogue*, Paris, 13–20 June 1886; later in the same year it was reissued as a separate pamphlet. The present text is taken from Fénéon, *Oeuvres plus que complètes*, edited by Joan U. Halperin, Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1970, pp. 29–31 and 33–7, translated for this volume by Peter Collier.

During the heroic period of 'Impressionism', the crowd always saw Edouard Manet in the forefront, provoking anger, bursting into the annual Salon, enthusiastic, versatile and dramatic; but to tell the truth the final metamorphosis that turned the tar-brush painter of the *Bon Bock* into the luminist of *Linge* and *Père Lathuile*, was achieved under the influence of Camille Pissarro, Degas, Renoir and above all Claude Monet: they were the leaders of the revolution of which he was the herald.

MM. Renoir and Monet are not at the rue Laffitte exhibition, nor are MM. Raffaëlli, Cézanne, Sisley or Caillebotte. Despite these omissions, the new exhibition makes the situation very clear: M. Degas presents some typical works; Mme Morisot and MM. Gauguin and Guillaumin represent the sort of Impressionism that we have come to expect from previous exhibitions; while MM. Pissarro, Seurat and Signac have something new to offer.

Concerning M. Degas. Women squatting in their bathtubs fill them to the brim with their proliferating curves: one, whose chins reach her bosom, is scouring her neck; another, twisted in a spiral, has her arm bent behind her back as she scrubs her coccyx with a foaming sponge. Here, another's bony spine bends, as forearms, exposing pendulous breasts, plunge down between thighs to moisten a flannel in the bathwater round her feet. Masses of hair cascade over shoulders, bosoms over hips, stomachs over thighs, limbs over joints; and then that hag, seen from above, standing by her bed and clasping her buttocks, looks like a series of slightly swollen cylinders, fitting into each other. Seen from the front, a girl is wiping herself, kneeling down with her legs apart and her head bent over her flaccid torso. And it is in cramped spaces in dark, furnished hotel rooms, that these bodies, bruised by a rich patina of copulation, childbirth and illness, stretch their limbs or scrape their skin.

But now for the open air. A woman who has been bathing in the river, stands amid the greenery to get dressed, her chemise billowing around her uplifted arms. Three peasant women, ample and bovine, enter the water, their bent backs exaggerating the swell of their enormous rumps beneath the blazing sun, and their half-stretched, ape-like arms flail the air as they wade laboriously into deeper water, a wolf-like dog snaps at their calves.

In M. Degas's work as in no other, human flesh lives an expressive life of its own. This cruel and knowing observer uses line to elucidate the mechanics of every movement, even when complicated by incredibly foreshortened ellipses; his lines record not only the essential movements of a creature in motion, but also the most insignificant and secondary muscular repercussions, hence the definitive unity of his drawing. This is an art of realism, yet one which does not derive from direct observation – when a person knows that they are being observed, their movements lose their innocent spontaneity; M. Degas does not copy from nature: he builds up a collection of sketches of the same subject, from which his work will draw its undeniable veracity; never have paintings less betrayed the laboured image of the 'posing model'.

His use of colour shows his individual and innovative expertise; he has expressed it through the gaudy silks worn by his jockeys, through his ballerinas' lips and ribbons; today he displays it in muted, almost latent effects, taking as their pretext the russet of a mane of hair, the purplish folds of damp linen, the pink of a cast-off cloak, the rainbow play of water swirling acrobatically round a basin.

\* \* \*

M. Gauguin's tones are extremely close to one another, giving a muted harmony to his painting. Massive trees spring from rich, luxuriant and humid ground, invading the frame and blocking out the sky. The air is heavy. We catch a glimpse of bricks suggesting a nearby house; garments lie abandoned, bushes are parted by muzzles – cows. The painter constantly contrasts these russet tones of roof and beast with his greens, and echoes them in the water flowing between tree trunks and through the long grass. There are also his Norman beaches and his cliffs, a still life and finally a wood carving dating from 1882.

\* \* \*

Mme. Berthe Morisot is sheer elegance: her workmanship is strong, bright and lively; charmingly feminine but never insipid; and despite an air of improvisation, her tonal values are accurately calculated. Her paintings of young girls in the grass, or just out of bed, or brushing their hair are exquisite pieces of work; and her confident drawings and swift watercolours are a delight.

\* \* \*

From the very beginning the Impressionist painters, with their concern for truth which led them to limit themselves to the interpretation of modern life directly observed and of landscape directly painted, saw objects as intimately related to one another, with no chromatic independence, each sharing its neighbours' luminous codes of conduct; traditional painting considered objects as ideally separate, and lit them with a poor and artificial light.

These reactions between colours, these sudden perceptions of complementaries, this Japanese vision, could not be expressed through the murky sauces stirred on the

palette: these painters therefore used separate notes, leaving the colours to respond and vibrate as they suddenly came into contact, and recompose themselves at a distance; they surrounded their subjects with light and air, modelling them in luminous tones, sometimes daring to abandon all relief; sunshine itself became embedded in their canvases.

Thus they proceeded to decompose their colours; but this decomposition operated in an arbitrary way. A streak of pure paint flung across the canvas might give a sense of red; its glow would be cross-hatched with green – MM. Georges Seurat, Camille and Lucien Pissarro, Dubois-Pillet and Paul Signac all divide tones in a deliberate and scientific manner. This development dates from 1884, 1885 and 1886.

If, for example, in M. Seurat's *La Grande-Jatte*, we examine any ten-centimetre-square section sharing a uniform tone, we will find on each single square centimetre of its surface, forming a swirling cluster of tiny marks, all the elements which constitute that tone. In that shady lawn the majority of strokes yield the local colour of the grass; others, orange-tinted and more widely spaced, express imperceptible effects of sunlight; others, purple, act to introduce the complementary of green; a cyanide blue, elicited by the proximity of a patch of sunlit grass, concentrates its grapeshot towards the line of demarcation but scatters it more thinly nearer to hand. In the construction of the patch itself only two elements intervene, green and solar orange, deadening all reaction with the furious bombardment of their light. Black being absence of light, that black dog will be coloured by reactions within the grass; its dominant note will therefore be dark purple; but it will also be invaded by a dark blue elicited by adjacent areas of light. That monkey on its leash will be punctuated with yellow, its individual characteristic, and pockmarked with purple and ultramarine. All this – admittedly excessive when translated into the crude notation of writing – deploys within the frame of the painting a complex and subtle calculation.

These colours, isolated on the canvas, are recomposed on the retina: this gives not a mixture of colours as material (pigments), but a mixture of colours as light. Do we need to recall that, for the same colours, mixing pigments and mixing light do not necessarily produce the same results? We also know that the luminosity of optical mixing is always far superior to that of material mixing, as has been demonstrated by the many equations of luminosity established by M. Rood. For violet carmine and Prussian blue, giving blue grey:

$$\frac{50 C + 50 B}{\text{mixing of pigments}} = \frac{47 C + 49 B + 4 \text{ black}}{\text{mixing of light}}$$

for carmine and green:

$$50 C + 50 V = 50 C + 24 V + 26 \text{ black}$$

It is easy to understand why the Impressionists, and even Delacroix, in his time, when striving to express extremes of luminosity, might wish to substitute optical mixing for mixing on the palette.

M. Georges Seurat was the first to propose a complete and systematic paradigm of this new painting. His vast painting, *La Grande-Jatte*, displays as far as the eye can see

its monotonous and painstakingly spotted tapestry. In this case, quite clearly, talent is irrelevant and deception impossible, there is no place for virtuoso passages – however lazy the hand, the eye must be alert, perceptive and learned; the movements of the brush remain the same, whether faced with an ostrich, a haystack, a wave or a rock. And while it is possible to advocate the merits of cut and dried, ‘honest craftsmanship’ in rendering, say, long grass, still branches, or thick fur, on the other hand, ‘fine-brush’ painting is necessary at least for the execution of smooth surfaces, and especially for the nude, to which it has not yet been applied. The subject is the island itself – under a blazing sun, at four in the afternoon, boats gliding sideways, teeming with its haphazard Sunday population delighted to take the air and walk among the trees; and nearly forty people, informed by imperious, hieratic drawing – strictly defined, whether seen from in front or behind, seated at right angles, stretched out on their backs, or standing to attention – as if by a more modern Puvis de Chavannes.

The atmosphere is singularly transparent and vibrant; the surface seems to tremble. Perhaps this sensation, which we also experience when faced with other paintings in the same room, could be explained by Dove’s theory: the retina, aware that different beams of light are acting upon it, perceives, in a series of very rapid oscillations, both the dissociated coloured elements and their resultant combination.

M. Paul Signac is attracted to the urban landscape. Those of his canvases which date from this year are painted by dividing the tones; they attain a frenetic intensity of light: *Les Gazomètres à Clichy* (March–April 1886) and *Le Passage du Puits-Bertin à Clichy* (March–April 1886), with their fences where workmen’s trousers and smocks are hung up to dry, their desolate, raw walls, burnt grass and roofs ablaze in an almost tangible atmosphere, rise darkly, and then hollow out into an abyss of blinding blueness; in *L’Embranchement de Bois-Colombes* (April–May 1886) the trees are burnt and withered. Seas seethe beneath blazing skies. He also knows how to translate the melancholy of grey weather, how to show water trapped between quaysides: as in his *Boulevard de Clichy par la neige* and his *Berge à Asnières* (November 1885).

At the previous exhibitions, M. Camille Pissarro triumphed with his vegetable gardens, his *Plaine au chou*, his *Sente aux chou*, his *Clos du chou*, superb landscapes. Transforming his material, he brings to Neo-Impressionism a mathematical and analytical rigour and the authority of his name: henceforth he decomposes tones, systematically. Sunlit landscapes, white houses amid orchards in blossom, vanishing perspectives, cornfields punctuated by spindly trees, limitless space, and high above, an azure sky filters through light, fleecy clouds. There are also some very fine, very linear pastels, where country women stretch, dress, rest, eat or work. Some gouaches. Some etchings reproducing the streets and the port of Rouen.

## 8 Félix Fénéon (1861–1944) ‘Neo-Impressionism’

Coined by Fénéon himself, the term ‘Neo-Impressionism’ served to acknowledge the connection of divisionist work to a specific modern tradition, while conveying the sense that it represented an advance. The purpose of the following essay was both to explain the connection and to make clear the nature of the advance. It was originally published as ‘Néo-Impressionisme’ in *L’Art moderne*, Brussels, 1 May 1887, where it answered to the interest

created by divisionist work at the exhibition of Les Vingt in 1886. At the outset, Fénéon makes an important distinction between the ‘luminist’ tendency of early Impressionism and the concentration on modern-life themes shown by Cassatt, Degas, Forain and Raffaëlli, further distinguishing those painters whose comparative public success was achieved through a watered-down combination of the two (de Nittis... Bastien-Lepage). In the second and third sections of the essay he offers a clear account of the rational basis of the technique and of its function in synthesizing the fleeting sensation into perpetual form. The essay was reprinted in Fénéon, *Oeuvres plus que complètes*, edited by Joan U. Halperin, Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1970, volume 1. The text of our extract is taken from pp. 71–4 of that edition, translated for this volume by Carola Hicks.

### I

Impressionism, merely latent in Turner and Delacroix (the Chapel of the Holy Angels at Saint-Sulpice), tried to turn itself into a system under Edouard Manet, MM. Camille Pissarro, Renoir, Claude Monet, Sisley, Cézanne and Ludovic Piette. These painters are distinguished by their extraordinary sensitivity to their own reactions to colour, by a tendency to decompose tones, and by their attempts to imbue their canvases with intense light. In their choice of subjects, they proscribe history, anecdote and dream, and, as their working method, they promote rapid and direct execution from nature.

If we want the word ‘Impressionism’ to have any reasonably precise meaning, we have to reserve this term for the ‘luminists’ alone. This immediately eliminates Miss Mary Cassatt, MM. Degas, Forain and Raffaëlli, whom a mistaken public included under the same heading as MM. Camille Pissarro and Claude Monet: although it is true that all of them sought the sincere expression of modern life, scorned the traditions of the schools, and exhibited together.

Let us recall the first Impressionist exhibitions. Given the innate stupidity of the public, the idea of choosing between well-finished paintings and wild daubings left them dumbfounded. They found it crazy that a colour should produce its complementary, ultramarine giving yellow, red giving blue-green, since all the most learned physicists would have affirmed in scholarly tones that the definitive effect of darkening all the colours of the spectrum is virtually to add to it greater and greater quantities of violet light – they would always have infinitely preferred to bow down to the murky violets of a painted landscape. Accustomed to the pitch-black sauces cooked up by the cabin crew of the schools and academies, their stomachs churn at the sight of bright painting. We have to admit however that from time to time the public felt revolutionary pangs and they queued up to take their pleasure with de Nittis, Roll, Carrier-Belleuse, Dagnan-Bouveret, Goenette, Gilbert, Béraud, Duex, Gervex, Bastien-Lepage – and this was their great orgy of modernity.

As for technique, at first there was nothing very specific: the Impressionist works gave themselves airs of being improvised: they were rapid, rough and ready.

### II

Impressionism only developed its rigorous techniques from 1884–5. The instigator was M. Georges Seurat.



The basis of M. Seurat's innovations, which were already implicitly contained in certain works by Camille Pissarro, was the scientific division of tones. Thus, instead of stirring his mixture on the palette to achieve the more or less finished hues required to represent the surface, the painter will place directly on the canvas brushstrokes depicting the local colour, that is the colour that the surface of the object would take on in bright light (essentially the colour of the object seen from close up). This colour which he has not made achromatic on his palette, he has made achromatic indirectly on the canvas, by virtue of the laws of simultaneous contrast and through the intervention of another series of brushstrokes, corresponding to:

- (1) the proportion of coloured light reflected unadulterated on the surface (this will normally be an orangey sunlight);
- (2) the smaller proportion which penetrates beneath the surface and which is reflected after having been modified by partial absorption;
- (3) light reflected by adjacent bodies;
- (4) surrounding complementary colours.

Strokes executed not through wild slashes of the brush, but through the application of tiny dots of colour.

Here are some prerequisites for this way of working:

- I. These strokes are composed on the retina, in an optical mixing. Now, the luminous intensity of the optical mixing is much greater than the mixing of pigments. This is what modern physics tells us when it says that any mixing on the palette will eventually lead to black;
- II. Since the numerical proportions of the drops of colour may vary infinitely within a very small space, the subtlest shifts in relief and the finest gradations of hue can be exactly translated;
- III. This splattering of the canvas requires no special manual dexterity, only vision – but what experienced and artistic vision!

### III

The first Impressionists sought to show how our view of sky, water and natural greenery varied from moment to moment. Their aim was to record on canvas one of these fleeting apparitions. This resulted in the need to capture a landscape in a single session, and the tendency to exaggerate the features of nature in order to prove that it was a unique moment which would never be seen again.

What the Neo-Impressionists are trying to do, is to synthesize landscape into a definitive aspect which will perpetuate that sensation. (In addition to which, their procedures are incompatible with haste, and require work in the studio.)

In their figure scenes, there is the same distancing from the accidental or the transitory. And so those critics who yearn for the anecdotal will grumble: they are showing us puppets not people. They still have not tired of that Bulgarian's portraits, which seem to ask: Guess what I'm thinking! They feel no shame in seeing on their wall a gentleman whose sarcasm is rendered

immortal in the malicious wink of his eye or a flash of light that has been waiting around for years.

The same perspicacious critics compare Neo-Impressionist pictures to tapestries or mosaics, and find them wanting. Even if correct, this argument would be worth very little; but it is fallacious: just take two steps back – and all these drops of reversed colour blend into waves of luminous matter; it's as if the craftsmanship vanished: the eye is now solicited only by the very essence of painting.

Need we add that this almost abstract uniformity of execution does not diminish the originality of the artist, and even enhances it. Indeed, not to distinguish Camille Pissarro, Dubois-Pillet, Signac and Seurat one from another would be ridiculous. Each of them proudly flaunts his individuality – if only through his own distinctive interpretation of the emotional significance of colour, and the degree of sensitivity of his optic nerves to varying stimuli – but never through the sole use of some facile device.

Alone among the crowd of mechanical copiers of the outside world, these four or five artists achieve the sensation of life itself: this is because objective reality is for them only a pretext for the creation of a higher, sublimated reality, which becomes infused with their personalities.

### 9 Georges Seurat (1859–1891) Letter to Maurice Beaubourg

By 1890, when this text was written, the divisionist technique had been adopted by a number of artists in France, Belgium and Italy, and Seurat was concerned to establish his status as its inventor. Maurice Beaubourg was a journalist to whom he aimed to explain the principles underlying his work. In the resulting statement, colour-theories derived from the works of Chevreul, Maxwell and Rood (IIC5, IVb6 and 9) are combined with Charles Henry's theories of expression (VIb5) and with Wagnerian ideas about the power of music. These last were common currency in the Symbolist circles to which Seurat's contacts were largely restricted after 1886 (see VIc2). The most substantial practical expression of the principles outlined is to be found in his major subject paintings *Parade* (1887–8), *Le Chahut* (1889–90) and *Le Cirque* (begun in 1890 and left unfinished at his death), though similar principles are also at work in the smaller landscapes of the same period. The letter is dated 28 August 1890 but seems never to have been sent. There are four extant drafts. The present version was first published by Fénéon in his article 'De Seurat', *Bulletin 9*, Paris, 17 June 1914. It was reprinted in *Seurat*, catalogue of an exhibition at the Grand Palais, Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1991, Appendix E, pp. 430–1, from which this translation has been made by Akane Kawakami. Words crossed out by Seurat are printed within square brackets.

*Aesthetics:*

*Art is Harmony*

*Harmony is the analogy of Opposites, the analogy of things similar in tone in tint in line considered by the dominant and under the influence of a combined lighting*